



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Consequences of Fakhrizadeh's Killing

by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael Ofek

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,837, December 3, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, long-time mainstay of the Iranian military nuclear program, is a severe blow to that program and another massive intelligence failure by Iranian internal security. It is difficult at this stage to assess the implications of the operation on the Iranian nuclear program and the political situation, especially in light of the upcoming change of government in Washington.

The assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on November 27, 2020 caps off one of the Iranian regime's most difficult years:

- On January 3, Qassem Soleimani was killed at Baghdad International Airport in a missile strike conducted by a US drone. Soleimani, who was commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, served as both mastermind and engine of Iranian terrorist activities around the world.
- On January 8, the Iranian air defense system mistakenly shot down an Ukrainian passenger plane taking off from Tehran Airport—a huge error attributed to Iranian jitters over possible US reprisals for the attacks on US bases in Iraq in retaliation for Soleimani's killing. The plane crash killed 176 passengers and crew, including 82 Iranians and 63 Canadian citizens (most of Iranian descent).
- US sanctions caused the Iranian economy to collapse and the national currency to plunge to an unprecedented low, and there has been an accompanying dramatic rise in the cost of living and a jump in unemployment.
- On top of all that, morbidity and deaths in Iran as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have reached new heights, with the regime on the verge of losing control over the spread of the virus.

- Since the end of June, a series of mysterious explosions and fires has taken place throughout Iran, including at security installations, on ships, and in factories. Particularly notable were the June 26 explosion at the Hujir missile fuel plant near the Parchin military complex and the July 2 explosion at the Natanz uranium enrichment plant at a facility used to assemble advanced centrifuges.
- Tehran's proxy Hezbollah stands accused of being responsible for the massive explosion on August 4 in the port of Beirut that caused enormous destruction and killed about 190 people in the Lebanese capital.

The killing of Fakhrizadeh is next on this list of disasters. Fakhrizadeh served in the Revolutionary Guards at the rank of brigadier general and taught physics at the Guards' Imam Hussein University. His role in Iran's nuclear program apparently began in 1998, when he was appointed head of the Physics Research Center (PHRC). At that time, the institute was researching nuclear weapons development. The institute was subsequently renamed the Institute of Applied Physics and its research subsumed into the AMAD program, which was led by Fakhrizadeh.

After the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iranian leadership decided to hide the AMAD program. Fakhrizadeh transferred the bomb development project to Malek Ashtar University for Technology in Tehran and set up the Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research, which was moved to a new site.

The Iranian leadership also decided to separate the military nuclear program, which would remain confidential and continue to develop under the leadership of Fakhrizadeh, from projects that could be presented as peaceful (including uranium enrichment). The latter projects were under the auspices of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran.

According to reports, Fakhrizadeh visited Pyongyang in February 2013 with a delegation of Iranian nuclear experts to observe North Korea's third nuclear test. He is also believed to have been present at North Korea's first two nuclear tests.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) apparently learned of Fakhrizadeh from US intelligence following information obtained by the CIA in 2004 from an Iranian defector's laptop. Based on this information, Fakhrizadeh's name appeared in the March 2007 UN Security Council Resolution 1747 (which tightened sanctions on Iran) as involved in nuclear

and ballistic missile activities. He was also named in the IAEA's director's quarterly report in May 2008 as involved in Iran's "Project 111" (packaging the Shihab 3 ballistic missile with a nuclear warhead).

The IAEA concluded that Fakhrizadeh was the key figure in Iran's military nuclear effort, and he came to be described by the media as "the father of Iran's nuclear bomb." Tehran refused to allow IAEA inspectors to interview him even after the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), apparently not only out of fear for his life but for fear that elements of the regime's nuclear weapons program would be exposed.

The killing of Fakhrizadeh raises a number of questions:

- **Did he remain active in the Iranian nuclear program after the JCPOA?** There is no clear answer to this question as ever since 2015, Iran has concealed its activities related to the development of nuclear weapons, including those of Fakhrizadeh. It is likely that he continued to be active in Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons following the signing of the deal, albeit covertly and in fields of theoretical calculation.
- **Who killed Fakhrizadeh?** According to Iran, it was Israel, with or without the US, that killed Fakhrizadeh, and that is how the operation is being presented in the world. However, it is not inconceivable that the Iranian opposition organization Mujahidin Khalq, which has long fought the Islamist regime, was responsible for the operation, or at least took part in it. As one may recall, an organization called Panthers of the Homeland claimed responsibility for the July 2 explosion at the Natanz uranium enrichment plant.
- **How will the regime be affected by the loss of Fakhrizadeh?** He was not only a good scientist but an excellent manager, and it is not certain that he had an equal among the Iranian nuclear scientists who remain. It is likely that his death had a severely demoralizing effect not only on the Iranian nuclear community but on the regime as a whole, as the killing of key figures and the mysterious explosions inside Iran over the course of the year point to a chronic failure of Iranian internal intelligence.
- **How will Iran react?** Though senior Iranian officials have promised revenge for the killing of Fakhrizadeh, given Israel's demonstrated capabilities vis-à-vis Iran on the military, intelligence, and clandestine fronts, Tehran is likely to be very careful about the intensity of its response, if indeed one ever comes.

- **What are the policy implications?** The depth of the regime's mourning over Fakhrizadeh suggests that the nuclear program he headed was aimed at developing nuclear weapons, contrary to what Tehran has claimed over the years. The political consequences of the killing will depend largely on two things: the severity of the Iranian response and the conduct of the US. The situation created by the death will likely affect the Biden administration's intention and ability to return the US to the nuclear deal. It also remains possible that President Trump will carry out some form of military action against Iran in the waning days of his presidency, which would further complicate the situation. As for Israel, Fakhrizadeh's killing seems to strengthen Jerusalem's growing ties with the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, which fear Biden's intention to return to the JCPOA and improve US relations with Tehran—a scenario that could encourage them to view Israel as the only country capable of defending them against Iran.

Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael Ofek, a BESA Center Research Associate, is an expert in the field of nuclear physics and technology who served as a senior analyst in the Israeli intelligence community.